

Territorial and courtship displays of Mauritius Cuckooshrike *Lalage typica*

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Mauritius Cuckooshrike *Lalage typica* is endemic to the island of Mauritius and forms a superspecies with Réunion Cuckooshrike *L. newtoni*. Both species are globally threatened: *L. typica* is considered Vulnerable based on its small range and population size, last estimated by C. G. Jones at 300–350 pairs (BirdLife International 2012), and *L. newtoni* Critically Endangered (BirdLife International 2015).

My observations of Mauritian Cuckooshrike were made in Black River National Park, Mauritius, between October 2013 and February 2014. One of the few displays known in this species was reported by Cheke (1987) and Safford & Beaumont (1996), involving adult males, and referred to as 'aerial duels', summarised as 'up to 4 birds chase around or over the forest before returning to their own territories' (Safford 2013). I observed this behaviour on three occasions but can add some further details.

The first observation occurred while watching Echo Parakeets *Psittacula eques* from above the canopy on the morning of 9 November 2013 in the Brise Fer area. Multiple males were heard calling and then three were seen to gather c.45 m above the valley bottom and c.30 m above the forest canopy, before they began to fly in partial unison, mimicking one another's flight patterns, in a somewhat circular fashion, while emitting the typical harsh *kek* call. They continued to lightly pursue one another, twirling upwards, without any particularly dominant bird taking an aggressor role, and occasionally hovered while flying around one another. No physical contact occurred and there was no obvious aggression as one would expect from a male chasing another male from its territory, rather the behaviour seemed more akin to an aerial contest or display of fitness, rather like a tok (described by Tuck 1972 as the aerial equivalent of a lek), which has previously been used to describe displays in snipe (Tuck 1972, Sutton 1981) and Lyre-tailed Nightjars *Uropsalis lyra* (Hilty & Brown 1986).

Thirty minutes later, playback of the male territorial call triggered the same behaviour, with another three (presumed) males rising into the air, repeating the previously observed behaviour. The third observation occurred on 13 November shortly before dusk, in the same location, and starting again from the same emergent tree. On this occasion, three birds rose into the air unprovoked, but only two continued with the aerial display for c.1 minute, before flying over a ridge and out of sight. Aggressive aerial chases of intruding males from one territory to another through the canopy were seen multiple times, and were clearly very different from the aforementioned observations. It should be noted that without a vantage above the canopy, these behaviours would have been very difficult to observe from the ground, unless stationed on a ridge or elevated road with few visual obstructions.

The only description of potentially similar behaviour in this family were those made by Skead (1966) of male Black Cuckooshrike *Campephaga flava* partaking in an 'excited fluttering moth-like flight near female'. Dueling or aerial lek behaviours in the Campephagidae as a whole does not appear to have been reported in the literature (Keith *et al.* 1992, Taylor 2005).

Likewise, a review of published literature failed to reveal any previous descriptions of courtship behaviour in Mauritius Cuckooshrike (R. Safford *in litt.* 2015). On 23 November 2013, at c.06.00 h, a female cuckooshrike was heard in Brise Fer, c.10 m from the main track,

in a recently cleared guava plot. The female was seen first, and shortly afterwards the male. The birds were within a known territory and the observations were made c.40 m from a nest discovered a few days later. They were noticed due to the unusual noise they were making and the following performance was made on a horizontal guava branch c.3 m above ground. The female was squatting, performing a slow wing bate every few seconds while emitting a soft single-note call in sequence with each wingbeat. Her hunched posture was similar to that of the pre-copulatory or solicitation position in other birds. The male began to perform a simple lateral display, standing taller, tilting the entire body and slightly raising the opposite 'shoulder' to fully display its mantle to the adjacent female. The male then began to jump sideways over the female every 5–10 seconds, bobbing its tail with partially drooped wings, while emitting the same call as the female but slightly louder. The male remained parallel to the female, with neck extended and head pointed towards her, and its bill only a few cm away from his partner's. The parallel posture and head-pointing was maintained while leaping back and forth over the female. This continued for c.1 minute, thereafter the female flew 20 m to another perch close above ground, where the behaviour continued for a further 1–2 minutes. Although copulation was not observed, it possibly occurred beforehand or shortly after when the pair flew to the second perch, as observation was constrained by dense vegetation. Horne (1987) noted soft calls during copulations (<https://macaulaylibrary.org/audio/72108>).

On 23 December 2013 in Brise Fer a juvenile cuckooshrike was seen feeding in a cleared guava plot within a few hundred metres of where the courtship behaviour occurred. The bird was foraging from 2 m above ground to the canopy c.10 m high. The juvenile was observed taking bush crickets and other invertebrates gleaned from the bark and leaves of the endemic trees it was foraging in. An adult female brought food to the juvenile every few minutes and the juvenile chased and begged for food before and after being fed, but searched for food alone otherwise. The juvenile appeared undisturbed by my presence and fed within a 30 m radius of where it was initially seen for six days. Although the male remained close by, it was not observed feeding the juvenile insects, although previous observations have documented both adults feeding young (Safford & Beaumont 1996). The juvenile was estimated to have fledged c.2 weeks previously.

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The May 1924 Meinertzhagen record of cranes over London

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In his summary of Common Crane *Grus grus* records for London, the first to be deemed acceptable by Self (2014) was from '1924: Kensington, flock heard at night on 8 May'; the next acceptable record is not until 1973. Reference to the Committee of the London Natural History Society (1957), which also accepted the May 1924 record, reveals the person responsible to be Richard Meinertzhagen, who had published it in an article relating to the seven-acre Kensington Park Gardens. Meinertzhagen (1942) recorded that:

'...one of the most remarkable records for the garden, if not for London, occurred about midnight on May 8th, 1924, when my wife and I were returning from a theatre in a white fog. The unmistakable call of crane was heard, not one but many, passing over at a great height. So penetrating is this call that when migrating it can be heard long before birds come into sight. ... This fine bird, which once bred regularly in the British Islands, doubtless passes over Britain more regularly than is generally realised.'

This record is indeed remarkable, as on that date Meinertzhagen and his wife were engaged in a collecting trip to Madeira, where they arrived by boat on 29 April and departed on 22 May (Meinertzhagen 1925). Although the year of this visit is not mentioned in his paper, Cocker (1989) gave it as 1924 and a check of >30 specimens of species referred to as taken on the trip, now held in the Natural History Museum, Tring, confirms this.

Regarding UK weather for May 1924, 'The number of days of fog during the month was small' (Meteorological Committee 1924). More specifically, the detailed weather register for the South Kensington area for 8 May notes 'Clear night' (Met Office National Meteorological Archive *in litt.* March 2016).

Although our grounds are different, we are not the first to have reason to doubt this record. Among the London Natural History Society bird record cards (now preserved as electronic scans) was one by 'RCH' (almost certainly R. C. Homes) that referred to Meinertzhagen (1942) and stated:

'In conversation with R.S.R. Fitter at Upsala [*sic*] in June 1950 Col. Meinertzhagen said that cranes normally make a direct flight on migration from Spain to Sweden. The ones heard over London were definitely *Grus*, and not demoiselle or sarus, but might possibly have been escaped specimens of one of the Asiatic species of *Grus*. Note: the latter seems unlikely as several birds were heard and in view of Col. Meinertzhagen's experience there seems no reason to doubt his identification of the species, though in the case of such an